German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence
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Grasp the pattern, read the trend

Asia in Review

(1/3/2018)

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to the first issue of CPG´s 'Asia in Review' in March 2018 by which we hope to provide you with another solid overview not only of the most important facts about law and politics from Pakistan to Japan, but also the pattern shaping the greater trends in international relations, order and disorder.

With greetings from the AiR team I wish you an informative read and a good start of the week!

With my very best regards,

Henning Glaser

Director, German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance (CPG)

P.S. Don't forget to check out our website and Facebook page for upcoming events and the latest information about CPG and its partners!

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Law and Politics in East Asia

China: Indefinite rule of Xi Jinping?

(ldq) The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party has published 21 proposals for constitutional revisions [National People's Congress, in Chinese] set to be approved by the first plenary sessions of the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) which will begin off on Monday. The politically most far-reaching among them is the proposal to remove a clause of Art. 79 restricting the number of terms of president and vice-president to two. This revision, along with the likewise expected insertion of the clause 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' in the preamble of the constitution, would pave the way for an indefinite presidency of Xi Jinping and for a further consolidation of his power and his position as most powerful leader since Mao. [South China Morning Post 1]

Likewise, the expected election of former anti-corruption chief and member of the Politburo Standing Committee Wang Qishan as one of the four vice presidents [Asia Channel News] and of top economic advisor Liu He as vice premier and governor of People's Bank of China [Reuters] reflects Xi's efforts to underpin his position by placing trusted and loyal aides at the top echelon of the state apparatus.

Critics view the constitutional proposals as a back fall to 'ancient traditions of the Mandate of Heaven' and 'seed for chaos' in the country and point to risk posed to the system's stability by scrapping a system of institutionalized, regular and ordered power transition introduced in the constitution in 1982 in the wake of the experiences of the Cultural Revolution and its

personality cult of Mao therein. [South China Morning Post 2] [China Policy Institute: Analysis] [Brookings]

Military-civil integration in China: Strengthening cyber power capabilities within a corporate state model

(ldq) China's government is increasingly incorporating civil society and the private sector to strengthen its military cyber power capabilities, reflected in the recent establishment of the Cybersecurity Innovation Center. The center, working under the Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development and run by the of the '360 Enterprise Security Group', one of China's prime cyber-security companies, is tasked to "set up a cutting-edge cyber-security defense system for the military to help win future cyber wars" and to reach out to small- and medium-sized companies for cooperation on technology research and development projects in order to guarantee the supply of cyber defense services which meet practical combat requirements. [People's Daily]

Against this background, China's cyber militias with an estimated membership of 10 mio. people engaged in cyber espionage represents a modern manifestation of Mao Zedong's People's War doctrine. The challenge for the government lies in the question of centralizing and organizing this force to secure that it consistently serves the country's defense and military aims. [The Diplomat]

China: Apple's Chinese iCloud operations and encryption keys moved to China

(ldq) On Monday Apple officially transferred its Chinese iCloud operations to Guizhou-Cloud Big Data (GCBD), a local firm supervised by a board ran by government-owned businesses closely connected to the government. It has also started to host its iCloud encryption keys in China, instead of the US, for the first time, removing the need for Chinese authorities to go through US courts to compel Apple to give them access to data. With the Chinese government now having much easier access to Chinese users' data stores, human rights advocates criticize Apple, whose revenue on the Chinese market was 9.8 billion USD in the third quarter of 2017, for bowing the Chinese government's

pressure and fear increased infringements on internet security and privacy rights. [Deutsche Welle]

China: Relatives of US journalists detained

(ldq) Four ethnic Uighur journalists working with Radio Free Asia in Washington D.C. have reported their relatives disappeared or detained. The move is seen by them as retaliation of their coverage on the Muslim-majority Xinjiang region considered by the Chinese government as a hotbed of separatist forces. To suppress them the government has been driving a securitization push of unprecedented scope in the recent years. [Time] [AiR 4/2/2018]

Labor law reform in Japan: Government concedes essential part to opposition

(ldq) Bowing to fierce criticism of the opposition, Prime Minister Abe announced on Wednesday to remove the planned expansion of the 'discretionary working system' from the labor reform draft bill, a core element of the government's labor reform according to which employees would be paid according to hours agreed upon in advance instead of the actual hours they work. Prior to this concession to the opposition, Abe had already publicly apologized for an erroneous study of the Ministry of Labor on which the intended reform of the discretionary working system was based. Analysts view Abe's compromising stance as an effort to minimize political damage in the wake of his push for constitutional reform and the September leadership election of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party at which he will bid for a historic third term. [The Asahi Shimbun]

South Korea: Elder brother of former President Lee questioned in corruption probe

(ldq) Lee Sang-eun, the chairman of auto parts maker DAS, was questioned by the prosecution over a corruption scandal surrounding an auto parts company linked to former President Lee Myung-bak and his family. Lee Sang-eun, an elder brother of the former President, was called in for questioning over the alleged creation of a slush fund and unfair trade related to the company, as well as earnings the former

president's family gained from the sale of a large piece of land in southern Seoul. [Korea Herald] Lee's questioning is the latest development in a widening corruption investigation whose main target is widely considered to be the former President. [Air 4/2/2018]

Law and Politics in South Asia

Pakistan's ruling party chooses brother of ousted president as new leader

(hg) As expected, Pakistan's ruling party - the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) - has chosen Shahbaz Sharif as its president to replace his brother and veteran leader Nawaz Sharif after his latest disqualification for office by the Supreme Court.

At the same time, defying the authority of the court, PML-N also elected Nawaz as "leader for life". After Shahbaz's elevation as party president the possibility looms that he will replace Sharif loyalist Shahid Khaqan Abbasi as prime minister in case that the party sweeps back to power at general elections due in summer. Shahbaz brother Nawaz Sharif had served as prime minister twice and has each time been removed from office, in 1993 by a presidential order, and in 1999, by a military coup that saw him jailed and later exiled before he returned when General Pervez Musharraf stepped down. [New York Post]

Nepal: largest newspaper pressured over criticism of chief justice

(hg) Nepal´s largest newspaper had been summoned for publishing a series of articles of the country´s Chief Justice who seems to have given different dates of birth on various documents. Hearing of the case has been rescheduled. [The Hindu]

Bangladesh's political polarization may cause another level of resurging Islamist militancy

(hg) Amid Bangladesh´s ever increasing political polarization the International Crisis Group (ICG) warns in a report about growing risks that Islamist militants will exploit the situation with the general elections approaching and the recent Rohingya influx as further facilitating factors. [BD News] [Dhaka Tribune]

Meanwhile, the U.S. have designated 'IS-Bangladesh' as Foreign Terrorist Organization. [Dhaka Tribune] [Daily Star]

Maldives crisis: A government minister´s view

(hg) With most of international reports being highly critical of the increasingly authoritarian regime of the Maldives, the Asia Times features a view of a government minister on the ongoing crisis that sheds light on the possibility that more than only one of the involved parties is playing a rogue game, a possibility which deserves to be assessed more neatly.

The acute constitutional crisis having led to the state of emergency has been triggered when the five-member Supreme Court issued an order for the release and retrial of nine prisoners facing charges ranging from terrorism and attempted murder to treason and embezzlement including exiled, former president Mohamed Nasheed, currently living in Sri Lanka. The legality of this court decision as well as the government's claims of an attempted coup d'état by the president's half-brother and former dictator Gayoom remain as much in the dark as Gayoom´s current relation to the other oppositional force represented by exiled former president Nasheed.

In the minister´s account, which should be constitutionally addressed, the court acted unlawfully as indicated by a number of procedural particularities, when it, for instance, ordered the release and retrial of guilty parties without overturning any of their

convictions, did not rule in an open hearing – as stated by law – but behind closed doors and announced it's ruling at 11pm on a Thursday night just as the Maldivian weekend begins. Furthermore, so the minister, it refused to hear from either the attorney general or the prosecutor general, as it had been obliged to in the past whereas the chief justice even attempt to remove the attorney general for offering his professional opinion which was defeated by a 3-2 decision as was his subsequently tabled motion to impeach the president, a right only Parliament reserves according to the minister. [Asia Times]

Sri Lankan government under pressure

(hg) After the governing coalition´s losses in the recent local elections, the governing coalition is increasingly troubled that by heated discussions over a reform of the governing United National Party [Daily News], a far-reaching cabinet reshuffle that has affected several key ministries [Sunday Leader] and growing tensions between President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe [Daily Mirror].

Sri Lanka: Northern Province wants International Court to rule over alleged war crimes

(hg) The Northern Provincial Council passed a resolution to request the UNHRC to establish an International Court to look into the alleged war crimes committed by the armed forces during the wartime in the province. [Daily Mirror]

Seychelles swap sovereign debt with a protecting plan of its ocean

(hg) The Seychelles have agreed to swap parts of its national debt in return for designating nearly a third of its domestic waters as protected areas. The debt-for-nature deal was brokered by NatureVest, the conservation investing unit of US-based The Nature Conservancy which will purchase up to $21.6 million of the nation's over $400 million debt at a discount to redirect the payments from creditors to a newly-created local trust that will use the money to repay the initial capital as well as to fund marine conversation plans. By 2020, when the conservation plan is set to

complete, Seychelles will have protected more than 400,000 sq km of its ocean — an area larger than Germany. [Quartz]

Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

Indonesia: Law to curb criticism against House Members passed

(ls) Indonesia's House of Representatives has passed a law giving the Members of the House powers to obstruct corruption investigations and press charges against their critics. The revised Law of Representative Assemblies, also referred to as the MD3 law, also allows members to compel police to haul people into the House of Representatives to face questioning from politicians. The law change comes as the House members continue to wage war with Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), which has led numerous high-profile investigations into politicians. [ABC News]

In The Diplomat, Erin Cook argues that Indonesia's protest culture is one of the strongest in the region, with protests and demonstrations shutting down parts of Jakarta on any given day. If the MD3 law was to be applied wholly and indiscriminately, she holds that it would be possible for the entire function of the House's Ethics Committee be reduced to solely questioning detractors. However, analysts have pointed out that corruption investigators are the most likely of targets of the new legislation. [The Diplomat] The law will enter into force on 13 March 2018 if President Joko Widodo does not ratify it earlier.

Whether it would stand the test of constitutionality in the constitutional court, however, remains uncertain.

Indonesia: Ahok challenges conviction in the Supreme Court while police arrest "Muslim Cyber Army"

(ls) Jakarta's former governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, nicknamed "Ahok", a Christian convicted of insulting Islam, sought a judicial review of his case by the Supreme Court. Ahok was sentenced to two years in prison last year for blasphemy charges mostly based on an online video spread by Muslim extremists, provoking accusations of political motivation. Muslims had rallied in hundreds of thousands demanding his imprisonment. Ahok's conviction could prevent him from holding public posts under Indonesian law, because the offence carried a maximum penalty of five years. [South China Morning Post]

In a move against the spread of hatred and fake news online, Indonesian police arrested 14 members of a network called the Muslim Cyber Army, which allegedly has been using hacking, online misinformation campaigns and hate speech to push the country in a more conservative direction. Experts believe that social network campaigns — including fake news — have helped drive a turn to the right in the world's largest Muslim-majority country. [Washington Post]

Malaysia: Luxury yacht linked to 1MDB scandal seized in Indonesia

(ls) Indonesia on Wednesday seized a luxury yacht on the island of Bali sought by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) as part of a multi-billion dollar corruption investigation linked to Malaysian state fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB). 1MDB is at the center of money-laundering probes in at least six countries, including the United States, Switzerland and Singapore. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak is at the center of the scandal as he set up the fund in 2009 and previously served as chairman of its advisory board. [Reuters] The 1MDB scandal overshadows this year's general election, in which Najib Razak will face a fierce contest with former 92-year old Malaysian Prime Minister Mahatir Mohamad.

Malaysia: Legislation against fake news being mulled

(thn) Sabah minister Teo Chee Kang belongs to the supporters of the proposed law against fake news. He believes curbing the spread of fake news will protect social media users but also ensure social harmony among individuals. Behind the demand is amongst other cases an unfortunate Malaysian citizen who was accused of being a foreign worker and therefore labelled a phantom voter in the previous polls. He suffered harassment after a man had taken a photo of his identity card and posted it on social media with accusing him of being a phantom voter. [Free Malaysia Today]

Myanmar's assembly law to be tightened

(ls) In Myanmar, state media published details of a proposed amendment drafted by the parliamentary Bill Committee that would change key sections of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law, tightening freedom of assembly. The draft adds clauses that would allow local police to stop a protest if it is deemed to conflict with laws on "national security, rule of law, public order, or public morals", while also criminalizing financial support for such protest. Another proposed clause says that protest organizers must provide the authorities with "an estimated budget and source of funds". Finally, a 15-day deadline for the authorities to bring any criminal charges against protest participants would be removed. The development needs to be seen against the background of student protests against the government in recent weeks across the country. [Frontier Myanmar]

Rule of law in the Philippines: Supreme Court impeachment – Drug war and human rights – Duterte vows to step down in 2020

(ls) The Philippine Supreme Court's chief justice Maria Lourdes Sereno expects to be impeached by the House of Representatives next month and will go on leave to prepare for the trial. She drew the anger of President Rodrigo Duterte over allegations of undeclared wealth in bank accounts. The grounds for impeachment against her include alleged corruption and culpable violation of the constitution. Sereno has sought

dismissal of the complaint, calling the allegations totally false and "nothing short of an impeachment exercise based on fake news". Duterte last year already accused the Ombudsman anti-graft agency of allowing the use of illegally obtained or fabricated information to investigate allegations that he kept undeclared wealth in past bank accounts. [South China Morning Post 1]

Meanwhile, against the background of an investigation of the International Criminal Court into possible crimes committed in Duterte's proclaimed war on drugs, the Philippines' Foreign Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano warned the United Nations not to "weaponize" human rights and urged it to send an impartial investigator to assess the anti-drug war. Cayetano said, "human rights becomes a human wrong when the ridiculous assertion is taken seriously that drugs are harmless (...) and that taking the most vigorous measures to stop the evil trade constitutes genocide. That puts drug dealers and drug pushers on the same moral level as the victims [of] holocausts." [South China Morning Post 2]

At the same time, President Duterte said he would likely retire several years before the end of his term in 2022, in a bid to dispel concerns he will cling on to power and become a dictator. "I will step down by 2020, I will not wait for 2022," he said in a speech. "I am old. I have no more ambition. I really would like to rest." [Asian Correspondent]

Finally, the news website Rappler, whose license was repealed by the Security and Exchange Commission earlier this year, operates normally pending an appeal against the decision. Rappler claims that the charge is baseless, because its foreign investors neither owned shares nor had a say in its operations. Nonetheless, an American investor transferred its interests to local partners to remove an "artificial barrier" being used by the government to stifle Rappler's operations. [South China Morning Post 3]

Philippines: Will divorce become legal?

(ls) A bill legalizing divorce in the Philippines has been approved at the committee level in the House of Representatives and is set to be heard at a plenary level. It is the first time since 2005 that a bill pushing for divorce has come this close to being passed into legislation. The Philippines is the only country in the world apart from the Vatican that does not allow divorce. More than 80 percent of the country's population is Catholic. Only the country's Muslims —

about 10 percent of the population — can exercise divorce under the Muslim family laws. [Deutsche Welle]

Thailand: New parties forming themselves ahead of elections

(ls) In Thailand, the Election Commission began on Friday the first political party registration since 2014. It will last until March 31. Political activists are expected to try and apply to form political parties. After the applications are accepted, political groups must find the required number of 500 people and submit a request to hold a general assembly. Moreover, they are required to select a party leader and executives and write a party manifesto and regulations before their party status is endorsed. The entire process must be completed within 180 days. [Bangkok Post 1]

The New Palang Dhamma Party (NPDP) was already inaugurated on Thursday. The party was formed to follow the goals of the old Palang Dhamma Party of Major General Chamlong Srimuang, which was dissolved a decade ago. The majority of NPDP members are former members of that now-defunct party combined with some ex-members of the New Aspiration Party, Democrat Party, People's Alliance for Democracy and Thai Social Democratic Party. Speaking at the launch ceremony, Ravee Machamadol, the party leader, said his party is ready to throw its support behind current Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to lead the next government if the Lower House fails to reach a consensus on a replacement for him. [Bangkok Post 2]

Another new political group will be the Great Mass of People Party (GMPP), which is connected to veteran politician Suthep Thaugsuban, who was previously secretary-general of the Democrat Party. He left the party to form the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) and led prolonged street protests against the government of Yingluck Shinawatra, which culminated in the military coup of May 2014. [The Nation]

While many newborn parties will be led by familiar faces, a party so new it has not yet come up with a name will be headed by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, a 39-year-old billionaire who, in the past, has frequently attacked the political establishment. The new party is said to pursue progressive policies and adhere to a social democracy ideology. It is likely to be joined by prominent

academics and pro-democracy activists such as Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, a law professor from Thammasat University and member of the legal reform group Nitirat. [Khaosod English]

At the same time, the Pheu Thai Party faces the prospect of dissolution after it was accused of allowing former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who is widely believed to be its de facto leader, to control its internal affairs. According to the new constitution of 2017, a political party is prohibited from being influenced or controlled by an outsider. Thaksin allegedly met with high-ranking Pheu Thai party members in Hong Kong over Chinese New Year to discuss the future of the party's leadership. [Bangkok Post 3]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China: Military build up

(dql) Reflecting China's ongoing efforts to advance its military in line with President Xi Jinping's vow for a world-class military by mid of the century, a major state-run newspaper reports that China possesses the technical ability to build larger aircraft carriers. The news comes ahead of the release of the country's annual defence budget at the National People's Congress. [Reuters]

In a related movement, China's main supplier of warships announced that China might have a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in the water by 2025 to strengthen its maritime defences and to catch up with

the USA and France as countries with nuclear-powered carriers. China's two existing aircraft carriers use conventional oil power. [South China Morning Post]

China-US relations: Tensions rising over trade and Taiwan Travel Act

(dql) Sino-US relations are worsening in the light of President Trump's uncompromising stance on imposing tariffs on Chinese imports. Backed by muscular tweets on 'good and easy to win' trade wars, Trumps announced his decision to impose tariffs of 25% for foreign-made steel and 10% for aluminum. The President's announcement comes just when Liu He, China's top economic advisor, is in the US to hold talks with US government officials and business leaders on Sino-US trade issues. [Forbes]

Meanwhile, following the House of Representatives' passage of the Taiwan Travel bill in January, the US Senate on Wednesday also approved the bill which encourages high-level visit exchange between the United States and Taiwan. [Reuters]

Beijing voiced strong dissatisfaction against the move arguing that the bill violates the One-China principle and lodged solemn representations. [Xinhua]

Cross-Strait relations: Call for independence referendum launched

(ldq) Backed by former presidents Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian, a campaign to call a referendum on Taiwan's independence on April 6, 2019, was launched on Wednesday, 28 February by Formosa TV Channel chairman Kuo Bei-hong. At the related press conference the government was called on to reform the National Referendum Act to cover issues of independence as subject of referendums. The date of the launching marks the 71st anniversary of the so called '228' incident, an anti-government uprising in Taiwan violently suppressed by the Kuomintang-led Republic of China government with estimated 10,000 deaths. The date has been playing a crucial role in forming the Taiwan independence movement. [Focus Taiwan]

Meanwhile, Beijing on the same day announced measures aimed to provide Taiwanese companies and individuals freer access to opportunities and benefits on the Chinese mainland. Among other things, the new

measures will allow Taiwanese companies operating on the mainland to partake in the "Made in China 2025" program – the central government's blueprint for upgrading the country's manufacturing sector – as well as bid for infrastructure projects, and claim various tax incentives. Taipei-based Mainland Affairs Council denounced Beijing's move as attempt to buy political support. [South China Morning Post]

China-Philippine relations: Energy deals solely commercial, not government-to-government agreement

(dql) Against the background of an agreement between the Philippines and China last month to establish a special panel to work out joint exploration oil and gas in part of the South China Sea that both sides lay claim without having to address the touchy issue of sovereignty, Harry Roque, spokesman of President Rodrigo Duterte, Thursday announced that any potential deals between Manila and Beijing on energy exploration in the South China Sea should be agreed with a company and not the Chinese government. This announcement is the latest sign of warming ties between the Philippines and China under Duterte who, in exchange for trade opportunities and financing in key infrastructure projects, has put aside territorial disputes with Beijing. [South China Morning Post]

Sino-Japanese relations: Signs of a thaw?

(dql) Indicating a thaw after years of strained relations between Japan and China, Tokyo announced on Friday plans to invite Chinese Premier Li Keqiang for a formal visit which would coincide with a trilateral summit with South Korea in May. The visit of Li is considered a preliminary move to get President Xi Jinping's for state visit to Japan. Li's visit would the first visit of a Chinese leader to Japan in eight years. [The Japan Times 1]

Meanwhile, Japanese media outlets report on Tokyo's consideration of a plan to deploy new anti-ship missiles to the main island in Okinawa as a response to China's growing intrusions in the Miyako Strait in the past years. While none of these actions constitute a violation international law, they have drawn the ire in Japan. At the same time, the Miyako Strait is a key bottleneck for China's largest ambitions of dominating the so-called first island chain making it a key node for any Japanese defense strategy. [The National Interest]

In a related development, Japan's Defense Ministry is studying the feasibility of deploying F-35B fighter jets on Maritime Self-Defense Force helicopter carriers, Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera stated on Friday. This move is widely viewed as another sign that Japan is retreating from its strictly defense-oriented military posture. [The Japan Times 2]

Tokyo ready for talks with Pyongyang

(dql) Changing its hitherto uncompromising stance its stance on talks with North Korea, the Japanese government has announced plans to take part in informal talks which do not necessarily include substantive negotiations on Pyongyang's nuclear arms program. The shift puts Japan in line with the United States, which tried to organize high-level talks with North Korea earlier this month on the sidelines of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in South Korea. Prior to this shift Tokyo repeatedly insisted that a meaningful dialogue would only be possible with Pyongyang taking concrete steps toward scrapping its nuclear arms program. The shift, however, does not result in Japan easing up on its campaign of raising economic and diplomatic pressure on the North, the government stated. [The Japan Times]

Issue of 'comfort women' strains Japan-South Korea ties

(dql) In unprecedentedly strong rhetoric, South Korean President Moon Jae-in described and berated the Japanese army enslavement of so-called 'comfort women' during World War II as a 'crime against humanity', in a speech on Thursday, 1 March, a national holiday in South Korea marking 99 years of the March 1 Movement, one of the first public displays of resistance to the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula from 1910 and 1945. [Korea Herald]

Moon's speech comes amid tensions between Seoul and Tokyo over the 2015 bilateral agreement on the 'comfort women' issue, after Seoul came forward with a new policy in January, according to which Seoul will not seek renegotiation of the agreement with Japan, but demands Tokyo to do more for former comfort women, including an apology.

Tokyo rejected the apology demand and denounced Moon's statement as 'extremely regrettable' and

announced that a diplomatic protest has been lodged. [The Japan Times]

Australia and Japan eager to deepen relationship with ASEAN

(ls) The ASEAN-Australia Special Summit, scheduled for March 17-18 in Sydney, will mark the first time Australia has hosted a summit with ASEAN. The event is expected to feature discussions on how the region should work toward resolving key economic and security challenges including the Rohingya crisis and South China Sea dispute. The development needs to be seen against the background of Australia's release of a White Paper last November that did not feature any particular emphasis of close relations with Southeast Asia. Rather, it recommended keeping the U.S. engaged in Asia, reaching out to like-minded countries including India, Indonesia and South Korea, and preventing coercive ehavior from major powers such as China and Russia. [Bangkok Post]

Japan also vowed to intensify relations with ASEAN countries. This week, Japan's defense ministry announced that it would be holding an activity focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief inviting all Southeast Asian states and the ASEAN Secretariat. Prashanth Parameswaran describes in The Diplomat that the engagement is just the latest in a series of interactions Tokyo is rolling out as part of its wider regionwide engagement with Southeast Asian countries and its broader Indo-Pacific vision. [The Diplomat]

Afghan president interested in improving bilateral relations with Pakistan

(hg) Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani said that Kabul is ready for talks with both the Taliban and Pakistan in an attempt to forget the difficult past between the countries. [Pakistan Today][Geo TV]

A shadow over Sino-Pakistani relations?

(hg) China´s strategically highly important investment in Pakistan's Gwadar port which this is about to start transshipment on March 7 is threatened to be hampered by security threats. To secure Beijing's

funding of S$65.8 billion in infrastructure projects, Pakistan has even raised a special 15,000-strong security force.

Balochistan where Gwadar is located is one of the less secure parts of the country with more than 2600 people have been killed by terrorists since 2003, mostly off limits to outsiders and now crowded by Chinese whose security deteriorated recently. After Beijing's Embassy issued a warning of imminent terror attacks on Chinese targets December 2017, a Chinese manager at Cosco Shipping Lines has been gunned down just recently in an upmarket area of Karachi.

Moreover, Gwador points at one of the important weak points of the Chinese OROB plan. On the one side, heavy Chinese investment is expected to have turnout for the local population in terms of jobs, access and finally general material benefits. If this is not manifesting as other nodal points of Beijing's mega expansion project local population gets disappointed. If it lives also anyway in a difficult relation with its own government and on the tight security conditions, the investment climate can easily deteriorate with all well-known consequences. On the other side, although the heavy Chinese investments might be levered on the basis of the long-term calculation, there has to be some return as well, economic and symbolic. If the local population feels to get nothing, if Chinese citizens are threatened and returns on investments fail to materialize, both governmental partners are inclined to face difficult relationships. Currently, the situation is still not being close to that level. Yet, the possibility looms and is further increasing the costs of investment on both sides. [The Straits Times]

A related, likewise sensitive issue for Pakistan is Islamabad´s international perception of not doing enough against domestic terrorism and the Chinese role in this discourse.

As reported earlier in AiR, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a global money-laundering watchdog, will place Pakistan on its terrorist financing watchlist — the so-called grey list — after China withdrew its initial support for Pakistan to not be listed.

This unexpected change on the Chinese side might be explained by what Beijing might perceive as Islamabad's inaction against terror groups operating also against Chinese targets, especially in Baluchistan. [The Diplomat]

This move contributes to the currently slightly improving vibes in Sino-Indian relations whereas a sustaining impact on the latter might be doubted.

Noteworthy in this context, the U.S. military has expressed to see "very positive indicators" from Pakistan showing it is becoming more responsive to U.S. concerns about militant safehavens expecting Islamabad to go on to make a “strategic shift”. [U.S. News]

Signs of bettering China-India relations and prospects of the emerging Asian security order

(hg) Given that the rivalry between Asia´s great powers India and China has reached a structurally manifest stage, there have been recent signs of slightly improving relations as well. A Chinese call to “deepen strategic communication, beef up mutually beneficial cooperation and properly settle sensitive issues” has been well received with the Indian Embassy in Beijing saying the two sides “noted the need to build on the convergences [...] and address differences on the basis of mutual respect and sensitivity to each other’s concerns, interests and aspirations”, highlighting further that a “sound development of relations” would be “a factor of stability in the world today.” [The Diplomat]

Yet, the decisive question is, in how far current signs of bilateral improvement support expectations of a trend and, if so, how deep and pervasive such a trend might become. A significant change of the emerging regional order with India´s integration in the `quad` would represent a major strategic shift with vast consequences. Currently, softening stances between the countries might rather point at a mutual desire to restrain the established trend for the meanwhile rather than to replace it, at least from the Indian perspective.

Interesting in this context is an analysis of the Brookings Institution regarding the Indo-Pacific region as the primary locus of global growth and opportunity today while its security and stability are seen increasingly under duress. Putting the blame for this on China, shared interests of India and the U.S. as the world’s two largest democracies with two of the largest military forces are seen having propelled India-US security ties dramatically forward over the past decade which is reflected by the rapidly advancing defense ties.

Relations, however, are still not evolving in a mature and cohesive strategic frame as long as the US is seen as seeking focusing on tangible short-term returns on

its investment while India is about to make long-term decisions of potentially existential impact and thereby interested in reliable, long-term assurances that "will be neither fickle nor overbearing" [Brookings]

Another recent piece puts also strong emphasize on the fundamental competition between China and India with its strong expansive dynamics across the Indian ocean and beyond from Tanzania to Sri Lanka, Oman to Iran, the Maldives to the Seychelles and Bangladesh to Nepal. [CNBC]

Boeing heavily investing in Indian Defense Industry

(hg) Boeing Defence, Space and Security has quadrupled its sourcing from India to over USD 1 billion in the past two years, investing in talent, training and skills development to get frontline factory workers and technicians for advanced aerospace manufacturing. Now, a joint chopper fuselage manufacturing facility formed of Boeing and (Indian) Tata Advanced Systems has been established at Adibatla aerospace special economic zone/Hyderabad to co-produce Boeing AH-64 Apache helicopter fuselages and other aerostructures. The Hyderabad facility will eventually be the sole producer of AH-64 fuselages globally. [Economic Times]

India, Russia, Bangladesh signing tripartite pact for civil nuclear cooperation

(hg) As a landmark development India, Russia and Bangladesh have signed a tripartite agreement for civil nuclear cooperation in Moscow aiming at erecting a power station being built by Russia in Bangladesh while India is extending support for capacity building and training of Bangladeshi nuclear scientists. [Economic Times]

Looking at Vietnamese–Indian ties on occasion of high level visit

(hg) Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang visited India following up to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Vietnam in 2016 during which New Delhi extended a credit line of $500 million to Vietnam to

buy defense equipment and issued a joint statement on the respect of the international legal order of the seas implicitly referring to the South China Sea issue which is of importance especially for Vietnam. The present visit – besides an agreement on civil nuclear cooperation as well as for the development of a port in Vietnma's Nghe An province – much continued with both lines, a rules-based regional architecture and enhanced cooperation in trade and defense. [Economic Times] [NDTV]

Vietnam is a key country for the Indian government´s 'Act East Policy' with both countries sharing a similar stance towards China on the one hand and those powers trying to contain the Chinese influence in Asia - the U.S., Japan and Australia - on the other. Yet, given the potential, Indian-Vietnamese relations are still to be expanded in this framework, remaining modest in a number of key areas including defense business, bilateral trade in general and people-to-people relations, in particular in terms of tourism. [The Diplomat]

India-Jordan Agreements

(hg) After the recent fostering of ties with Oman, India has now signed 12 cooperation agreements with Jordan including one on defense.

In the field of defense cooperation, cooperation is broadly sought in areas like training, defense industry, counter-terrorism, military studies, cyber security, military medical services and peacekeeping.

Jordan is home to more than 10,000 Indians, who are employed in the textile, construction and manufacturing sectors, fertiliser companies, health sector, universities, IT and financial companies. [NDTV]

Nepal: In between Indo–Sino competition

(hg) A recent South China Morning Post article highlights once more the intensifying Nepali–Chinese relations to the disadvantage of India. [South China Morning Post]

Interesting news are reported from Pakistan whose Prime Minister seems to plan a two-day official visit in Nepal to congratulate Nepal´s new Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, news which have – surprisingly – explicitly

not been confirmed by Nepal´s Foreign Ministry. [Pakistan Observer]

Pakistan launches naval exercise as it aims to counter India, protect economy

(hg) Pakistan's Navy kicked off a major exercise which is part of a greater effort to modernize and expand the country´s naval power to counter growing Indian naval assertiveness and aims at validating the Navy's war-fighting concepts under evolving multifaceted threats and with regard of an enhancing cooperation with the Air Force at extended ranges into the Arabian Sea. [Defense News]

MILAN Naval exercises and Maldives declining to participate

(hg) The Indian Navy´s Andaman and Nicobar Command will conduct the biannual MILAN exercise from March 6-11. From the 23 countries having been invited, 16 have confirmed their participation, unsurprisingly including the Maldives whose government is dealing with a worsening domestic security situation, while India is favoring the opposition in the ongoing power struggle.

Among this year's participating nations are Australia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Bangladesh and Indonesia. [Mihaaru] [The Hindu]

New Chinese naval observation station in the Maldives: A dual use facility?

(hg) Against the backdrop of mounting international pressure regarding the Maldives constitutional crisis, China has reiterated that a joint Maldives–Chinese ocean observation construction has been agreed upon between the governments in December last year and is located close to Indian Kerala and Sri Lankan coast has no military applications. [Economic Times]

The crisis in the Maldives and mounting pressure by the international community

(hg) Maldivian ambassador to Sri-Lanka Mohamed Husain Shareef has invited the international community to visit and assess the situation of the nation, claiming that the opposition has projected a false and misleading scenario on the state on the nation.

Meanwhile, a high-level Maldives delegation sought to reassure the UN Human Rights Council that the situation remained stable suggesting the UN should focus on more preferring global issues. [The Maldives Independent]

Unimpressed of such assurances, the European Union warned the Maldivian government of potential "targeted measures" and called for acknowledging the disputed decision, to lift the state of emergency and restore civil rights of citizens including the release of all political prisoners, to engage in talks with the opposition and ensure that the coming elections will be for and free.

Notable is the report of law and consultancy firm - Persus Strategies LLC - titled "Moving from Condemnation to Action". The report, prepared by exiled former President Mohamed Nasheed's lawyer, recommends the EU Council to impose human rights-based sanctions in response to the constitutional crisis including targeted asset freezes and travel bans urging that "the time to act is now." [Mihaaru 1]

After police has arrested three more members of Parliament, altogether six opposition MPs seem to have been arrested in the frame of the ongoing constitutional and political crisis [Zee News], outspokenly commented by the US ambassador to the Maldives tweeting that '*arrests are happening so fast*' and that '*it is hard to keep track*'. [Raaije MV]

Making things worse for the government, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that a Maldivian tanker has been spotted by an aircraft of the Japanese Maritime Self-defense Forces tanker in the East China Sea, "strongly suspected" to have been engaged in ship-to-ship transfers with a North Korean vessel. The Japanese government declared that it had noted the UN Security Council Committee on the issue which amounts to breach of the corresponding UNSCR. [Mihaaru 2]

The involved vessels are the North Korean "Chon Ma San", designated by the United States as a sanctions-target and the Maldivian-flagged tanker "Xin Yuan 18". Responding, the Maldivian government denies the accusations, saying that the identified vessel 'Xin Yuan 18' would not be of Maldivian origin or be registered in

the country. Moreover, the government states that it condemned "the use of our national flag in a manner so as to tarnish the good standing and reputation of our nation" and that the Maldives has prioritized the implementation of all UN Security Council resolutions including those on North Korea. [NDTV]

Myanmar/Bangladesh: Burmese troops amassing at the border

(ls) Myanmar's army amassed about 200 soldiers and weaponry near the border to Bangladesh, meters away from a makeshift Rohingya settlement. The government of Bangladesh requested the withdrawal of the troops, saying that the movement so close to the border violated international norms. Thousands of Rohingya Muslims have set up a camp on the land between the two countries. While it is still technically Burmese territory, it is beyond the border fence and is dubbed "no man's land." [Asian Correspondent]

According to the newspaper The Irrawaddy's calculations which are based on government and NGOs' statistics, at least 90 percent of the Rohingya population of conflict-torn northern Rakhine State has fled to neighboring Bangladesh in the wake of the government's "clearance" operations following Muslim militant attacks last year. The report also describes the destruction of villages and mosques with detailed numbers. [The Irrawaddy]

Laos: Border dispute with Cambodia

(ek) Cambodia undertook live-fire weapons training sessions south of the border with Laos in the contested area OÁlay, in Stung Treng. The military exercise may be a demonstration of force prior to the upcoming elections in Cambodia. A spokesman for the Cambodian Ministry of Defense stressed, however, that there are no bilateral tensions between the two nations [The Phnom Penh Post].

Thai authorities detain Belarusian woman who claims to possess information on Russian interference in 2016 U.S. election

(ls) The Thai police arrested a Belarusian woman on Sunday in Pattaya on charges of pursuing business

activities without a proper permit. Unrelated to these charges, the woman, Anastasia Vashukevich, claims that she has witnessed a meeting between a Russian oligarch and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko in August 2016, in which the two allegedly talked about Russian interference with the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The woman said she will offer her information to U.S. authorities if they can prevent her from being deported to Russia. [Khaosod English]

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